

ORSETT BRIEFING PAPERS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

NO.15 - MEASURING CRIME

Official Statistics

How much crime is there? The most obvious answer to this question is to look at the official statistics, like those collected by the Home Office in Britain from police records ¹. The police definitions of crime are based on certain criteria: usually incidents that have reasonable evidence for their existence, and could be punished by a court.

But the police records are not necessarily an accurate measure of the amount of crime that takes place. This is due to a number of facts about police recording of crime.

i) A crime may not be reported by the victims, or the victims may withdraw their charges. This latter case is written off as "no crime".

ii) Human error in misrecording the crime.

iii) The police can make the decision as to whether to include a crime in the figures. They may feel that there is an error in the report or a lack of evidence.

iv) The police may use discretion or be under pressure about certain crimes. Police forces can also vary from region to region in their prosecution of particular crimes.

For example, in 1981 it was noted that more crimes were occurring in the English Midlands county of Nottinghamshire compared to similar counties. The reason was found to be police recording practices in Nottinghamshire (eg: more likely to record lower property offences) ².

¹ The current version at the time of writing is available at <http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs10/hosb1210.pdf>.

² Farrington, D.P & Dowds, E.A (1985) Disentangling criminal behaviour and police reaction. In Farrington, D.P & Gunn, J (eds) Reactions to Crime: The Police, Courts and Prisons Chichester: Wiley.

v) The appearance of the police may resolve an issue, and a crime is not committed (eg: the police appearance at a dispute may stop any potential violence).

vi) Increased reporting of incidents in recent years because of increased telephones generally, and mobile phones.

vii) The time between the crime and reporting it to the police does not allow investigation (ie: many years may have passed).

There are a number of stages in the process of an event becoming recorded as a crime (figure 1), and factors will influence each stage. Some factors will reduce the likelihood of the event being recorded as a crime, while other factors will increase the likelihood.

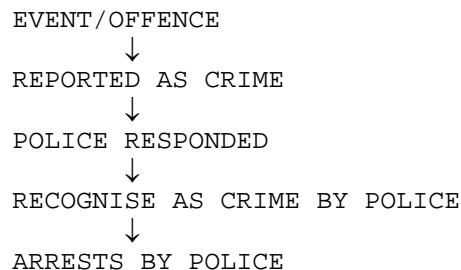


Figure 1 - Stages in police recognising event as crime.

1. Observation of event as offence

- Victims may be unaware that offence committed.
- Witnesses not present.
- Where offence committed - eg: while under police surveillance.

2. Reporting of offence

- Perceived seriousness of event.
- Faith in police to deal with it.
- Fear of reprisal.
- Availability of means to communicate with police eg: telephone.
- Requirement of police investigation for insurance purposes.
- Embarrassment of victim.
- Preferences of victim for informal sanctions (ie: dealing with it themselves).
- Victim is partly to blame or likely to be in trouble

when police investigate.

3. Recording by police

- Depending on priorities or crackdown.
- Workload/chance of clear-up.
- Social status of complainant.
- Interpretation of law - eg: vandalism as damage over certain amount.

4. Follow-up by police

- Availability of officers.
- Sensitivity/moral values of public.
- Handled by other agencies - eg: Inland Revenue.

5. Miscellaneous

- Increased youth crime because increased young people.
- Increased car theft because increased cars.
- Mobile telephones mean more reporting.
- Increased awareness of crime, and role of media.
- Increased number of police, and better communications.
- "Fashions" - eg: belief that authorities should deal with crime compared to parents.

Alternatives to Official Statistics

VICTIM SURVEYS

The traditional ways of collecting crime figures from police records often ignore the victim. So it is better to use victim surveys. Victim surveys give details of the extent of crime, and also the effects of it. Victim surveys are relatively new - the first national one in USA was 1972, and in Britain 1983 ³.

A good survey will aim for a cross-section of the population to sample. The British Crime Survey (BCS) in 1988 ⁴ set the pattern by sampling nearly 14 000 addresses based on parliamentary constituencies, and a sample of adults from each household. Each of the individuals sampled filled in four questionnaires.

It is important to note that not all crimes are reported by the victims. The most obvious case is when both the offender and the victim are breaking the law. The British Crime Surveys show a number of reasons why certain crimes remain unreported by the victims (table 1).

REASON	EXAMPLE
- Too trivial; no loss;	- Theft from motor vehicle;
- Police could do nothing; police not interested; police not trusted; inconvenient to report;	- Robbery;
- Dealt with matter ourselves	- Theft in a dwelling eg: legitimate visitor to house steals something;
- Reported to other authorities;	- Personal theft; eg: theft at school reported to teacher;
- Fear of reprisals	- Physical attack

Table 1 - Main reasons given by victims for not reporting crime to police.

The 1996 BCS turned the question around, and asked the victims why they did report the crime to the police. The reasons given include:

³ The current version at the time of writing is available at <http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs10/hosb1210.pdf>.

⁴ Mayhew, P et al (1989) The 1988 British Crime Survey London: HMSO.

- Obligation to report - duty to report; it was a serious crime; stops repeat of crime to others;
- Advantages to victim - recovering of property; for insurance claim; needed police assistance; stops re-victimization by same criminal;
- Retributive motive - catch and punish offender.

It has been argued that the BCS has a problem because of an assumption made in the first survey⁵ and continued afterwards. It was assumed that an individual will never be victimised in the same way by the same perpetrators more than five times in a year (ie: an arbitrary ceiling of five reports was imposed)⁶. But re-victimisation is common.

A re-analyse⁷ of the BCS 2005-6 data that removed the ceiling of five reports found that many crimes were under-reported by the BCS. The BCS figure of 6.8 million "household" crimes (eg: burglary) increased to 7.8 million, and "personal" crimes (eg: assault) rose from 4.1 million to 6.3 million.

There are general problems with self-reported victim surveys like the BCS:

- i) The respondents could make up an offence;
- ii) The respondent could misunderstand the question and give incorrect information;
- iii) The answers could include an incident not in the appropriate time period for the survey;
- iv) The respondent could forget an incident;
- v) There are sampling problems - from who to choose in the sample to how to multiply the sample results to give a total figure for the population.

OFFENDER SURVEYS

These are surveys based on a sample of individuals with a criminal record.

For example, Groth et al⁸ using a sample of 137 male

⁵ Hough, M & Mayhew, P (1983) The British Crime Survey: First Report London: HMSO.

⁶ Farrell, G & Pease, K (2007) Crime in England and Wales: More violence and more chronic victims Civitas Review 4, 2, 1-6.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Groth, A.N et al (1982) Undetected recidivism among rapists and child molesters Crime and

sexual offenders asked them about the number of sexual offences committed. Their confidentiality was assured. The researchers found many undetected offences - an average of five for each offender. This suggests that sexual offences could be severely under-recorded by the police.

An alternative method is to ask individuals without criminal records if they have committed undetected offences. It was found that 88% of undergraduates asked had drunk alcohol under the age of 16, and 74% had viewed an "18" certificate film under age. Most of the offences were trivial, with only 1% admitting to theft ⁹.

But there is always the question as to whether these types of self-reported surveys are accurate. Individuals could exaggerate or not admit to some crimes.

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⁹ Furnham, A.F & Thompson, J (1991) Personality and self-reported delinquency Personality and Individual Differences 12, 585-593.

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